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The Edge Of Divorce

All too many marriages in our Western society are crumbling.

Whatever this portends for national stability, it's clear that it means heartaches for thousands of couples - and their extended families. It means distress for uncounted children.

What begins as an exciting dream too often ends in heartbreak.

by James McBride

Is there a way to avert such tragic loss? What steps can you take to ensure your marriage is fruitful and not merely hanging by a thread "for the sake of the children"--or the relatives--or even the church? (Marital distress isn't limited to "non-Christians"!)

[A previous article explored the foundations of a good marriage. If marriage--or divorce--is on your agenda, be sure to write for a copy of *Spend A Lifetime - Together.*]

Personal Responsibility

Of course there are external factors that tend to tear marriages apart--friends, relations, careers, children, pressures of society. But when a marriage begins to go wrong, most couples start blaming one another or blaming circumstances--or God!-- for their situation.

It must be accepted, however, that at the heart of every marriage break-up lies sin. Not a fashionable word, but nevertheless true! And sin is personal. That means each of us has *personal responsibility* for our marriage. Usually, but not always, there's sin by both partners. It may be a mix of infidelity, self-centeredness, ignorance, anger, violence, sloth, alcoholism, sexual perversion, an unforgiving spirit, hate, insensitivity, drugs, immature responses, financial mismanagement. The list could be expanded.

(Stop and think! Are any of these "qualities" at work in your marriage?)

In time, life for one or both partners becomes intolerable. And divorce seems the only answer.

Divorce is terminal. It's an end to hopes and dreams. Months or years, perhaps decades, of shared experience

evaporates. Two lives once entwined in common purpose, intent on founding a dynasty, sparkling with romance, based on mutual caring have slowly fallen apart. Somehow the challenges of life have overwhelmed shining hopes for a lifetime together.

And we are each responsible.

Bitter Roots

Look at your own marriage. Are the seeds for its destruction already extending their bitter roots through every aspect of your life? Are there niggling concerns about fidelity? Angry outbursts or simmering resentment? Long silences? A parting of interests? Cooling of affection? Biting sarcasm? Loss of mutual respect? If so, be aware that your marriage is on the slippery slopes to divorce!

But--does it matter? Can't you just start again with a new partner?

Despite the relaxing of divorce laws, it isn't that easy. The evidence is in: *divorce solves little.*

There's heartache often lasting years--even when divorce has put an end to prolonged physical or psychological abuse. Children generally do less well at school. New partners are elusive. The economic and emotional legacy can be horrendous. And the same destructive habits are usually carried on into the next marriage with the same unsurprising result--further misery and another divorce.

Our personal destructive habits spawn a host of unstable relationships, serial marriages, unhappy children, upset parents and friends, disillusioned men and women - and burdensome taxes to pay for it all.

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But the cause is not divorce!

Is Divorce Sin?

Divorce is often the inevitable result of a fractured marriage. It's the result of ignorance of or blatant disregard for "the rules" of marriage. A result of immature emotional reactions, of selfish pursuits, of indiscipline, of improper desire, of failure to cope with the inevitable challenges of married life. But divorce isn't of itself always sin! (Though in certain circumstances it is.)

Don't get it wrong. Divorce is awful. It is failure. It hurts. It is the mutual tearing up of a contract. It is destructive. *God hates it* (Malachi 2:16). And it can indeed be sinful.

On the other hand God allowed Moses to *permit* divorce (Matt. 19:8). He even Himself "divorced" Israel whom He had "married" (Jer. 3:8)! And both Jesus and Paul recognized the possibility of divorce. Because divorce isn't usually of itself sinful most people who have before conversion been divorced and have remarried can be converted and become a part of the Church of God without "continuing in sin". If such divorces were sin, couples would have to separate to express their repentance. When someone repents there can be no dispensation to continue to sin!

The sin, rather, lies in *those months and years that led to* divorce. It lies in the acts of flirtation and adultery. It lies in the failure to "submit one to another". In the nurtured resentments that fester into hate. In the lack of the practical concern - "love" - that must undergird every enduring marriage: love for your husband or wife, love for your children, love for your extended family. Sin lies in the refusal to forgive, in uncompromising rigidity, in the unwillingness to share the burdens of marriage, in the contempt bred by a lack of mutual respect, in secret lustful thoughts, in the neglect of the spiritual. Sin lies in the failure to "love your neighbor" (in this case your spouse!) as yourself.

Do you see this pattern in your own marriage? Sadly, all too many Christian families fall into such sin.

Christian Marriage

If the signs are there - then seek wise counsel. For it usually is sin for two Christians, two baptized people in whom is the Spirit of God, to divorce! An editorial in a Christian periodical indicted the leaders of the mainstream churches for their wholesale adultery - that is, divorcing their Christian spouse and re-marrying [*Prophecy Today* July 1991]. *Christians must be reconciled*. In Christian marriages, divorce with remarriage is usually a godly option *only when one partner refuses the discipline of the*

Word of God and His Church. One partner - and not always the original "offending" one - reverts to being an "unbeliever" through implacable unforgiveness.

That's a frightening thought. On the matter of forgiveness - and just before a discussion on divorce - Jesus said to the disciples "So also shall my heavenly Father do to you [i.e. withdraw forgiveness] if you from your hearts forgive not men their trespasses (or, offences)". Read all of Matt. 18:15-35. A forgiving spirit is an attitude we must cultivate daily throughout life - especially in marriage. So - *get the forgiveness habit* and help save your marriage!

Let's be grateful that our loving Father is merciful and, upon our repentance, generously forgiving of our sin!

For the people of God, marriage is a lifetime commitment.

Change Is Essential

No marriage is perfect. For each of us is unique - and imperfect. We come to marriage with a suitcase full of entrenched habits and ideas and prejudices built during our years of being single. Social and educational backgrounds are often diverse. Each of us has his or her own vision of the future. There's a clash of wills on endless minor and major disputes.

But in a godly marriage we are to "become one flesh". Our thoughts are to blend in unison. Over the years we must learn to harmonize our dreams, cope with each other's emotional Pandora's box, discipline our personal aspirations. Each of us is responsible to accommodate to the partner's irritating quirks. And to get rid of our own!

And each must learn to forgive.

If you are divorced or on the edge of divorce or contemplating remarriage - have you conquered those sins which were *your* part in the breakdown of your marriage? Is your anger now properly disciplined? Are your thoughts in sexual matters now submitted to the will of God? And have you quit fueling those thoughts by censoring your reading and viewing? Have you, with God's grace, put away your illicit desires? Are you willing to bear your proper responsibilities, willing to shed inappropriate self-interests (hobbies, even business), willing to be forgiving, willing to bear one another's burden?

Maybe your special sins aren't listed here. But whatever they are you need to work out - with your partner, your minister, your counselor, your God - how you are going to lick them!

YOU need to change!

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Rules of the Game

Marriage was instituted by the Creator as the best possible way - with a few exceptions - for two separate human beings to live. It is based on the in-built physical, mental, psychological, emotional traits of male and female. We need one another. Man is incomplete without woman - and vice-versa! Said God: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

And marriage can work!

In the melding of two separate lives as one is the true fulfillment of each. Indeed marriage is designed - by God - as a reflection of the perfect relationship that is to develop between Jesus Christ and His Church. Wrote the apostle Paul: "The marriage relationship is doubtless a great mystery, but I am speaking of something deeper still - the marriage of Christ and his Church" (Eph. 5:32).

For most young couples, however, marriage is no more than a game. When you tire of it you quit. When you're losing you go. But marriage is *much more* than a game. It does indeed - like any game - have rules. And like any game, any living being, any device, it must abide by them to function properly.

The first rule is - *marriage is no game!*

Marriage is not for children. Not a playtime to be disrupted when you're bored, or not winning, or find the going too tough for you, or when the glitter wears thin. Marriage is for real men, real women. It takes courage to commit to a lifetime of sharing. It takes courage and emotional maturity to reject the easy way of "living together" with its convenient bolt-hole of abandonment when the going gets tough. It takes courage and strength of character to face the heavy and numerous challenges of married life. Marriage needs commitment. Marriage *thrives* on commitment.

Plan of Action

So if you are on the edge of divorce - what can you do?

Here's an outline of some steps you can take.

- Commit yourselves to staying together - for life
- Accept that you share the responsibility for the distress in the marriage.
- Identify the positive reasons for staying together.
- Recognize that sin is the basis of the failure of your marriage.
- Work together to identify the problems, perhaps with a counselor, or your pastor.
- Map out clear plans to tackle the main challenges.
- Discipline yourselves to win each challenge.
- Commit your marriage to the Creator God, exercising faith daily.
- Remember - there is always a way to meet each challenge!
- Above all, model your marriage on the way of life revealed in the Scriptures, especially laying the foundation of faith in Jesus Christ.

In light of its awesome function and purpose, every marriage - your marriage - deserves the best effort you can give to make it reflect the hope that God has for it.

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